National War College

Force Protection after Khobar Towers A Case Study

The National Strategy Decision Making Process
Course 5603
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INTRODUCTION

The night of 25 June 1996 began as any other at Khobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, home of the United States Air Force's 4404th Wing (Provisional) On the roof of building 131, an apartment building housing members of the wing, a security police NCO was conducting a check of two sentries posted on top of the building At approximately 2149 hours, the three noticed a late model car drive to the end of the parking lot, face the lot entrance, and flash its headlights Moments later, a gasoline-type tank truck entered the parking lot and drove to a position directly in front of building 131 As the tank truck started to back up to the fence, the security police supervisor reacted immediately Ordering one sentry to remain behind and radio the control room to inform them of the incident, he took the other sentry and raced to the stairwell to alert and evacuate the building's occupants

Working their way from the top to the bottom, the security policemen had alerted the top three floors of the eight-story building when a bomb hidden in the tank truck, exploded The force of the blast, estimated at between three and eight thousand pounds of explosives, tore the north wall of the building off, and left a crater 55 feet in diameter and 16 feet deep 19 airmen were killed in the blast, and over 500 were wounded

The blast was heard as far as 20 miles away, but it reverberated most loudly in the American press and the halls of the pentagon How could it happen? Was the United States doing all it could to prevent such a tragic event? Was there a failure of individual responsibility? Was this an isolated incident or a systemic failure? Newspapers debated these questions for weeks, while the Department of Defense searched for the same answers

One area that finds general agreement among members of the Department of Defense is the dramatic change in the emphasis placed on the force protection program in the months after the bombing Changes were made that dramatically impacted the way all four services train and equip their forces, as well as the methods used by unified commanders when planning for and undertaking military operations

An entire paper could be devoted to the *process* of force protection as it has evolved since June of 1996 and actions taken This paper will instead examine the development of force protection *policy* within the Department of Defense in the aftermath of the Khobar Towers bombing Using the "Practitioner's Framework" provided in the course, the bombing will serve as a case study in the national security decision making process

THE ISSUE

The catalyst that put DoD's force protection program on the front burner was the report of the Downing Task Force Within days of the bombing, the Secretary of Defense appointed retired General Wayne Downing, the former Commander in Chief of US Special Operations Command, to conduct an assessment of the facts and circumstances surrounding the Khobar Towers bombing General Downing was directed to put together a task force and assess the adequacy of security, security policy, intelligence coordination, and funding and resources for security at Khobar Towers [1] [2]

[1] In his letter appointing Gen Downing to assess the Khobar Towers situation, Dr Perry listed seven areas for assessment In addition to the four identified here, Gen Downing was also asked to examine the division of responsibility between the Saudi authorities and US CENTCOM for security at Khobar towers as well as the division of responsibility between DoD and host country authorities elsewhere in the region. the sufficiency and effectiveness of intelligence about terrorism in the AOR. and the adequacy of coordination on intelligence and antiterrorism countermeasures among US CENTCOM. US embassies. host

General Downing's report, the result of thousands of hours of research, interviews, and visits throughout the theater, contained 26 findings Key findings, which stung the defense department and crystallized the issues facing Secretary Perry in this case included a lack of a comprehensive DoD policy providing common guidance, standards and procedures for force protection, lack of realistic standards for force protection, inadequate command structures and lack of command emphasis on force protection, and weaknesses in the intelligence process

The Downing report caused quite a commotion Long considered the premier military force in the world, there was now some question as to our ability to protect ourselves during military operations Newspaper headlines and editorials questioned military policy and leadership Congress scheduled hearings to look into the situation In a telling statement, General Shalikashvili, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, remarked "it just isn't right" that the US military is the most powerful in the world in every area but the ability to fight terrorism [3]

The issues, then, were clear The United States had to do better to protect its troops while deployed around the world One of our fundamental vital interests, the physical security of citizens of the United States, had been violated In addition, this failure had called our capability as a military power into question in the eyes of the world Failure to improve our abilities in this area would increase the risk to both military and US government civilians assigned around the world Existing policies and

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governments, and allies whose personnel are collocated with US forces, and finally to make recommendations on how to prevent new attacks, or minimize the damage of successful attacks

[2] Department of Defense, *Force Protection Assessment of USCENTCOM AOR and Khobar Towers Report of the Downing Assessment Task Force* Washington D C , 30 August 1996, p 1

[3] "General Faults Military's Anti-Terrorism Effort", *The Washington Post*, 20 November 1996 section A, p 20

practices had proven, at the instant the bomb detonated, to be inadequate Policies, procedures, rules, and regulations had to change to improve both our capabilities to protect the force, and our reputation as the best military service in the world in every area, including combating terrorism

CONTROLLING AUTHORITIES

It is certainly morally imperative to have a viable force protection program Sending our Nation's sons and daughters into harm's way without providing every reasonable protection would be a failure of the most reprehensible kind Without entering the debate as to the degree and level of responsibility for the specific failure at Khobar Towers, there was a "de facto" failure—19 airmen died

The primary directive on force protection up to this point was DoD directive 2000 12, the DoD Combating Terrorism Program, a directive that simply outlined responsibilities for various levels of command The standards under this directive were outlined in DoD handbook 2000 12-H, dated February 1993 As a handbook, measures outlined in 2000 12-H were not formal guidance, but protection initiatives that could be considered for evaluation and implementation There were no DoD mandated standards for antiterrorism planning, training, or operations Commanders were left to their own devices in determining antiterrorism requirements and structures for planning and policy implementation

THE DECISION MAKER AND OTHER PARTICIPANTS

Immediately after the bombing, military organizations at all levels of command took action to examine the incident and frame a response to questions being posed by higher command elements and outside interests While there was no great outcry, the American public was interested in understanding what exactly had happened and why Even more concerned were some of the relatives of those killed and injured, and Congress was pressing hard for answers as well, going as far as sending staff members to the scene to conduct a cursory review of the incident

Even with interest at the congressional level, the key decision-maker in this study was clear In a statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee in July 1996, Secretary of Defense William J Perry articulated his responsibility for force protection within the Department of Defense

> "In February of 1993 when I came before you as the President's nominee for the position of Secretary of Defense I said "The Secretary of Defense has the responsibility to oversee the Joint Staff and the CINCs in their direction of military operations " A critically important component in the oversight of military operations is ensuring appropriate force protection The responsibility for the safety of our military men and women is mine, and I expect to be held accountable for carrying out that responsibility "[4]

In this case, full authority was vested in the Secretary to direct force protection policy Subordinate officials had (of course) concurrent responsibility and commensurate levels of authority, but to properly address the issue, the direction had to come from the top

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[4] Congress, Senate, Armed Services Committee. *Saudi Arabian Bombing Hearing before the Armed Services Committee,* 104th Cong., 2nd sess , 9 July 1996

ACTION TAKEN

The actions taken by Secretary Perry upon receipt of the Downing report were simple, but extensive Secretary Perry directed force protection considerations be given heavier weight in deployment planning than it had received before He required each Commander-In-Chief to explicitly review the assignment of operational responsibility for force protection in every overseas deployment In a major move, he designated the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as the principal advisor and the Department of Defense's focal point for all force protection matters To fulfill this responsibility, the Chairman established J-33, the Combating Terrorism Directorate The Director of J-33 is responsible for reviewing standards, doctrine, deployments, budgets, technology development programs, and all other aspects of force protection policy and programming [5]

In addition, the Secretary issued a revision of DoD Directive 2000 12, which more specifically delineated force protection responsibilities, and codified the structure and actions discussed in the paragraph above The directive also established DoD Handbook 2000 12-H as a standard (vice a guide) and required the approaches set forth in the handbook be implemented wherever feasible [6]

FACTORS THAT AFFECTED THE PROCESS

The single biggest influence on Secretary Perry's decision making process was the Downing Task Force report General Downing, by his very nature (no doubt

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[5] Department of Defense, *Force Protection, Global Interests, Global Responsibilities Secretary of Defense Report to the President,* 16 September 1996 p 3
[6] Ibid

supported by the fact he had recently retired) conducted his assessment in a completely independent manner Given carte blanche to interview anyone and everyone, and to travel wherever necessary to properly complete his work, experts on his team worked around the clock for 60 days The task force interviewed over 400 servicemen and women, conducted security assessments at 36 sites in the theater, visited every major headquarters involved, talked to the entire chain of command from the Commander-in-Chief of US Central Command to the sentries standing post on the roof when the bomb went off, and reviewed and analyzed literally thousands of documents In a classified report of over 75 pages, General Downing identified 26 findings on issues ranging from standards and funding for physical security within the Department of Defense to application of advanced technologies and allied force protection efforts Included in the report were 78 recommendations to assist in the resolution of issues identified in the findings [7]

From the time of his appointment, General Downing received no direction from the Secretary or any member of the military chain of command His resulting report was direct and to the point, a document that could not possibly be ignored That it had great impact on the Secretary of Defense is apparent—as he himself stated in his report to the President "General Downing has given me that unvarnished and independent review of the Khobar Towers bombing and a tough critique of past practices and attitudes On the

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[7] Department of Defense, *Force Protection Assessment of USCENTCOM AOR and Khobar Towers Report of the Downing Assessment Task Force* Washington D C . 30 August 1996 p vii

whole, I accept General Downing's recommendations and I believe we can take effective action to deal with each of the problems identified in his comprehensive report "[8]

While the Downing report was the catalyst for change, momentum came from Congress Within days of the incident, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the Senate Armed Services Committee announced hearings into the circumstances surrounding the bombing The chairman of the intelligence committee, Senator Arlen Specter was reported as saying the Defense Department needed a shake-up and that he might push for Perry's resignation depending on the testimony his panel was to hear House Speaker Newt Gingrich joined Specter in suggesting Perry might have to resign, stating that if some of the security decisions "were as badly mismanaged as Somalia was (referring to the 1993 military operation in Somalia in which 18 American soldiers were killed) then I frankly think some people will have to resign" [9]

It was clear something needed to be done both to deflect unwarranted criticism, and to rapidly respond to identified weaknesses and problems Buying time while the Downing Task Force conducted its assessment, Secretary Perry was able to work with advisors and senior staff from the Joint Staff and all the services to start reviews of current force protection practices Quickly after General Downing filed his report on 30 August 1996, the Secretary sent a report to the President, outlining his actions and painting a strong positive picture for success in the future He was able to do the same with Congress when he testified before both houses on 18 September 1996

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[8] Department of Defense, *Force Protection, Global Interests, Global Responsibilities Secretary of Defense Report to the President,* 16 September 1996, p 10

[9] Bradley Graham, "U S General Didn't Tell Superiors of Saudi Refusal to Widen Buffer," *The Washington Post,* 2 July 1996 sec A, p 5

While questions remained for several months as to the specific personal responsibility and the assessment of blame for the incident, by taking a proactive stance Secretary Perry was able to prevent Congressional attacks on the force protection program within the Department of Defense

SUMMARY

This case study is illustrative of the decision making process used in addressing a national security issue Faced with an incident that demonstrated a weakness in policies and procedures designed to protect our vital interests, Secretary Perry realized significant changes were needed These changes were important for two primary reasons First, safety and security of deployed military men and women is imperative Secondly, identified weaknesses in our antiterrorism program, if not quickly dealt with, would not only result in undesired Congressional involvement, but undermine our military reputation with both our allies and our potential enemies By recognizing he was the key decision-maker, Dr Perry was able to institute changes that strengthened the antiterrorism program

As one might expect, the DoD antiterrorism program is under constant scrutiny from within the Department Final evaluation of the changes in the program will be recorded in history at some point in the future, but in the two and a half years since the bomb exploded at Khobar Towers, terrorists have not attacked a military target, and Congress and other potential critics have been silenced

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